

Television, Identity and Diaspora Youth:A Visual Ethnographic Study

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INTRO

As a consequence of broader theoretical challenges, post structuralism and experiences of diaspora themselves, we see a rising challenge to essentialized, unitary, fixed notions of 'ethnic' and 'cultural' identities. People actively perform identities, but only within the terms of available repertoires and representations. The notion of 'new ethnicities and associated terms as 'hybridity' have increasingly been taken up in accounts of diasporic experiences in the media and challenge essentialized notions of ethnicity itself. Furthermore, the thinking in terms of 'new ethnicities' relates more to the everyday life experiences of second and third generation diaspora who are born and raised in Western Europe and which are subject of this study. In all these debates it is impossible to separate 'ethnicity' from other identifications such as gender, education, age, etc..

Since second generation adolescent diasporic television use is characterized by hybridization in terms of program preferences as they watch transnational, global and local television content. The possible role of discursive practices in their identity constructions is complex. This research tries to give a better understanding of these complex processes and focuses on the interplay of ethnic and gendered identifications while acknowledging other possible important identifications. To this end, I used extensive visual ethnographical methods', where participants, produce their own media in order to give explanations for the role of media in everyday life and their identity constructions. Especially adolescents' identities are subject of this stance of research because:

"If somebody-in nowadays media society-wants to learn something about youth's ideas, feelings and their ways of experiencing the world, he or she should give them a chance to

express themselves also by means of their own self-made media products" (Niesyto, 2008: 137).

METHODOLOGY

My visual ethnographic study contained four creative research stages and lasted about two months. The main characteristics of the ethnographical approach are its focus on cultural elements, its long-term observation of activities of the group, and the active role of the researcher.

In the first exploratory or pilot phase which I will discuss during this presentation, the participating girls were asked to make a collage representing their 'ideal television program' by using magazines and drawing material. In the subsequent phases, the participants got an introductory course on camera use where basic filmmaking principles were learnt. Respondents were then asked to write a script for a trailer of their ideal television fiction program where they presented characters, themes, the title, genre, music, etc. The week after, the trailer was shot. Afterwards, the films were edited based on choices made by the girls themselves. In the end, the videos were presented to each other and their families. During each research stage, conversations, negotiations and discussions were audio-taped and field notes were taken.

This ethnographic research has a lot of advantages, first and foremost, it provides rich, various and in-depth material that is not solely 'verbal' but creates 'non-verbal', 'creative artifacts' as well. Furthermore, participants were given time to reflect on their thoughts and feelings about representations on television before producing a response. Next to methodological relevance, this research empowered young people who still risk social and political disempowerment and are under- or misrepresented in dominant media discourses. Also, it enabled youngsters to develop technical skills and experiment with different forms of representation which can result in an augmented media literacy. Nevertheless, it would be naïve to assume that young people could simply use media as a means of 'self-expression' or a

way of ‘making their voices heard’. The media are not neutral tools and young people will approach media production with a repertoire and a history of past media experiences that inevitably lead them in certain directions. Moreover, David Buckingham warns against the pitfall of overlooking the role of the (skilful) researcher in the analysis

The research was effectuated in cooperation with the teenage girls division of a local youth organization (VZW Young)’ that is localized in a so-called ‘deprived area’ in Ghent (a large city in Northern Belgium). It is an organization that aims at increasing personal and societal emancipation of youngsters and pays special attention to underprivileged, socially vulnerable mainly diasporic youth. The members of the ‘teenage girls division’ (all aged between 13 and 16 years old) are second and third generation diaspora girls with Turkish ancestors and diaspora girls from Bulgarian descent who only recently migrated to Belgium and form a natural peer group.

The data discussed here are the ones gathered during the pilot study and exist out of collages, individual interview transcripts and observation notes and thus allow for triangulation. During the pilot study, the girls were asked to imagine that they are television makers and are able to make their ideal television program. They were invited to represent their ideal characters, themes, location, title and ‘feeling surrounding the program’, making use of photos and cuttings from magazines and drawing material. Afterwards, collages were individually discussed. I am aware of the limiting character of the magazines that were employed (e.g. limited offer, reflecting ‘dominant’ culture...), and these limitations were taken into account in the analysis.

For the data analysis, I elected to adopt a fully ‘hands-on’, hermeneutic approach by immersing myself within the interview data, reading and re-reading the collages, transcripts and field notes in order to become familiar with the participants’ voices and the social contexts.

Generally, the analysis focuses on the content of the participants' ideal television program and on the role of gender and ethnicity within their stories and identifications. On a first level, the individual collages and transcripts of the interviews were analyzed. I looked at what constitutes an ideal program for each girl and if she identifies with characters or themes in her ideal program. Then, I checked what role 'gender' and 'ethnicity' play in her discourse and weigh these identifications out against other identifications that come at fore. Since identifications and repertoires are contingent to the social contexts, the findings from the first level will be linked to its surrounding contexts on an individual and group level. I continued with a meta-analysis as I shed an eye on the great diversity in repertoires and the broad spectrum of identifications that are possibly articulated when building up an ideal television show, without making essentializations of the group of girls.

Here, I will discuss two interesting case-studies:

CASE1: HILAL

A first case is the case of Hilal. Hilal is 15 years old, a second generation diaspora girl from Turkish descent, she attends a general education. The title of her program is 'Puberty'. At first sight, the title suggests that the program handles about a typical phase in life. In this phase, adolescents go through biological changes and are in search for a position in their environment and in broader society. The story revolves around two teenagers from Turkish descent living in Belgium who are in love, engage in unprotected sex and unintentionally get pregnant. When the girls' parents find out that she is pregnant, they oblige the couple to marry, but they refuse since their relationship is not stable. They request the parents to live together instead of marriage, but the parents get furious, so the young couple flights to Brussels...Most of the storylines (drugs, unprotected sex, being in love, teenage pregnancy) can be attributed to the puberty life phase. Hilal herself is a teenager and puberty is thus recognizable for her. Though the consequences of the teenage pregnancy in Hilal's story (forced marriage, run away from home...), can be explained by her own specific frame of

reference. She says: *“The parents were very angry, because they HAD to marry because in the Turkish land, when you lost your virginity, nobody wants to marry you anymore and then you HAVE to marry the boy you had sex with.”* From this statement it is clear that next to a phase in life, cultural meaning systems (“Turkish country”) play a constitutive role, given that Hilal sees a forced marriage as a logic outcome of premarital sex and subsequent damage of the family honor. Remarkably, she ascribes the obligation of marriage as inherently associated with her ‘descent’: ‘The Turkish land’ (and not for instance with religious belief or education). Hilal points out that she would like to see her story on real television, preferably on the commercial Northern Belgian, youth oriented channel VT4 because she wants to educate young people and to send out the message to engage in safe sex practices and preventing pregnancies and STD’s.

In order to get a solid view on Hilal’s choices for certain storylines, it is important to know some contextual information. The day of the pilot study, Hilal had a sexual education course at school where they were taught about safe sex practices and teenage pregnancies. Her story is thus also inspired by the experiences and repertoires that were available to her that day and were on top of her mind.

The interview clarifies that Hilal does not identify with her characters. She resolutely says *‘no!!!’* when I ask her if she recognizes certain aspects of herself or her life in one of the characters. This distancing or des-identification is illustrated when Hilal clearly emphasizes that she attends general education while the girl in the story attends ‘a lower’ schooling. While saying this, Hilal says that teenage pregnancy would not happen to her since it occurs more frequently among ‘lower’ educated teenagers. Moreover, by emphasizing that she attends ‘general’ education, Hilal challenges the dominant, reified idea that diaspora youngsters are lower educated and are more at risk for unprotected sexual encounters.

Her ideal program is an exciting, dramatic love story where she does not necessarily seek for identification with her characters and their experiences. Nevertheless, she likes to see some

familiar elements that are situated within her frame of reference and meaning systems. It is apparent that both main characters share her age and life phase (puberty) who experience a generational clash with their more traditional (first generation) parents. Hilal articulates that in her ideal program, she desires to see typical 'teen themes' complemented by elements that negotiate her hybrid 'cultural' identity. To built up her narrative, Hilal negotiates between different identifications and meaning systems namely her identity as a teenager, a successful student from general education, a Turkish girl living in Belgium, a Muslim,...

CASE 2: MERVÉ

Than we have the **case of Mervé** which is totally different from Hilal's collage. Mervé (age 15) is a successful student, she dreams of studying law. She finds it important to achieve high grades. She attends a conservative, catholic school in Ghent where green uniforms are mandatory. She is the only Muslim girl in her class. Mervé struggles to 'fit in' and finds it difficult to constantly fall in between Belgians and Turks. She says "*In the end, you start doubting about who you are, because when you go to Turkey, they call you 'Belgians' and in Belgium they call you 'Turk'...*" *"But in the end, you have Belgian passport, so I am a Belgian!"* Mervé has a hybrid television use as she prefers to watch Belgian channels but also watches Turkish satellite channels.

The title of Mervé's program is 'Forbidden love', a love drama where three emerging adults: Delphine, Marcel, and Ella are the protagonists. Marcel and Ella are a couple and are both university students. Delphine is Marcel's ex and cannot and tries to disrupt the relationship between Ella & Marcel. She is a problem child having problems with her parents' divorce and behaves rebellious. Ella, on the other hand is beautiful and models in her free time, she comes from a rich and upper class family and lives a careless life.

The title 'forbidden love' refers to a love drama, a soap with family intrigues and about student life. The choice for the soap genre is linked to the fact that Mervé prefers to watch drama series (especially Turkish drama). Mervé makes thus use of genres and conventions she

knows from everyday life experiences to construct her story. Noticeably, Mervés' characters all speak the Dutch language which she finds self-evident. When I ask her if she would find it pleasant if for instance one of her characters speaks Turkish, she literally says that this is of no importance to her. *"For me personally, I really don't feel the need, this is really not necessary"*. When asked if she is a 'practicing Muslim', she says *"hmm, yes a little bit, but I really don't find it important to see it in my program as well"*. The rest of the interview clarifies that Mervé prefers other themes such as: 'love', 'intrigue' and 'drama and a lot of misery'.

Mervé wants her program to be broadcasted on the public broadcasting channel 'één' *"because 'één' is a channel that everyone knows and receives! I want that my program is watched by as many people as possible!"* Mervé has obviously reflected on her the goal of her program that is to attract large audiences. If I demand her if she thinks that everyone will actually like her program as well, she postulates: *"I'm not sure, but I think so, I really think so, because it is a soap you know! Everyone likes soaps!"* From this statement, it is clear that she is media literate and sees the soap genre as a universal genre that attracts large audiences.

The construction of the narrative, the themes and choice of characters are based on certain identifications such as Mervé's aspiration to become a law student, her sociability, her unsophisticated personal life, her ambition to become a career woman, her higher class background and her identity as 'Belgian' girl. Mervé's program does not negotiate about 'ethnicity', 'language' or religion. These themes are not essential to her. She pities the fact that she is still perceived or defined as a 'migrant' person while she is born and raised in Belgium and speaks Dutch fluently. With her collage, she wants to make a statement and resists the hegemonic idea that adolescents with a Turkish background always want to display and manifest their 'ethnicity' (e.g. 'being' Turkish) or 'religion' ('being' Muslim). However, Mervés' resistant position is ambivalent since while resisting the hegemonic idea of 'ethnicity', at the same time embracing this hegemonic, dominant culture. With her story,

Mervé wants to illustrate that she is a ‘regular’ teenage girl that dreams and fantasizes about her future, struggles with love issues like every other teenage girl, her primary identifications are thus not about ethnicity.

CONCLUSION

From a meta-analytical viewpoint, two main themes emerge in all the ideal programs of the girls. Firstly, the experience of puberty and its related search for identities and societal positions. Secondly the common search for the articulation of femininity or how to ‘be female’ or ‘to do gender’. Despite these common themes, a great diversity in the articulations of gender and ethnicity are visible. Some girls emphasize their ‘new ethnicities’ or ‘hybrid cultural positions’ (e.g. Hilal) while other girls resolutely stay away from or resist ‘ethnic themes’ or characters (e.g. Mervé). However, what is more important, is the broad spectrum of identifications girls’ use in their collages or verbal discourses. These identifications often transgress ‘gender’ and ‘ethnicity’. These transgressions challenge the hegemonic, reified presumption (that is present in societal debates but also in academic research) that a national, ‘cultural’, ‘ethnic’ or ‘religious’ identification is always chosen as the primary identification by diaspora youth. Here, we see that identifications (or contra-identifications) differ along contexts and are inspired by personal trajectories, lived experiences and available repertoires.

While keeping in mind its limitations, visual ethnographic methods prove to be useful in the search for a holistic method to approach complex issues such as the link between identity and representation. The ethnographic component contributed to a better contextual understanding while the ‘visual’, ‘creative’ part adds more time for reflexivity and empowerment for the participants, next to the ‘verbal outcomes’.